The System—And Its Enemies Within

Post 3/25/73

A few years ago, when students on various campuses and blacks in many big cities were promoting, in word and deed, violence as a method of redressing their grievances against this nation's political system, we regarded their doctrine as misguided—and we still do. It is not an incipient campus uprising or big city conflagration which brings this back to mind, but rather the development which occurred in Judge John J. Sirica's courtroom Friday morning. For we speak now not as resolute pursuers of the Watergate story over the past several months, but rather as true believers in the rightness and efficacy—for all its imperfections—of the American political system. And those of us who continue to hold that particular configuration of political and judicial arrangements dear, can only feel betrayed by the information that has been issuing forth over the past few weeks in Washington concerning the manner in which the Nixon administration is abusing the system itself, cheapening and endangering it. That, more than the light it sheds on specific details of the Watergate case itself, is the significance of James McCord's letter to Judge Sirica.

Mr. McCord, former security chief for the Committee to Re-Elect the President and a man who was found inside the Democrats' Watergate headquarters during the burglary last spring and convicted for his crimes in January, wrote a letter to Judge Sirica shortly before he was to be sentenced. From it, we learn:

- That "political pressure" was brought on the defendants to "plead guilty and remain silent";
- That his family has expressed "fear for my life if I disclose knowledge of the facts in this matter";
- That "perjury occurred during the trial in matters highly material to the very structure, orientation and impact of the government's case";
- That others were involved in the episode who "were not identified during the trial when they could have been by those testifying."

Mr. McCord said that he was forwarding this letter to the judge "in the interests of justice, and in the interests of restoring faith in the criminal justice system, which faith has been severely damaged in this case."

Well, there is certainly a lot of restoring to be done. For even as we have heard Mr. McCord's testimony to the effect that the judicial process has been perverted by the politicians in the matter for which he was on trial, we have been hearing further evidence that the disease is not contained. Witness the newest revelations of concern and activity at the highest levels of the Nixon administration with the rearrangement of the ITT case—all of which was roundly and publicly and shamelessly denied by the administration last spring. Witness the President's nominee to head the FBI, L. Patrick Gray III, acknowledging that the President's counsel, John Dean, "probably" lied to him last summer in a matter of serious moment in the Watergate investigation.

Contemplate everything you have tried to absorb over the past few weeks regarding the manner in which federal investigators and high administration officials have bent what you might have thought of as the inviolate procedures of our system of justice to their own personal and political interests. Contemplate Mr. McCord's anxieties: His family's fears for his life, he says, seem to him excessive—but he does believe that if he reveals what he knows "retaliatory measures will be taken against me, my family and my friends."

May we remind you that the culprits in all this are not Abbie Hoffman or Mark Rudd or Bobby Seale or Eldridge Cleaver? May we remind you that this series of grotesque events has been brought to you by the same wonderful people who brought you slogans about law-and-order and attacks on those who would not "work within the system" and pieties about standing up for what was "right about America"?

We raise these questions not because we are contemptuous of the principles which animate those slogans, but rather because we took them on faith, because we continue to place our trust in the right working of what others so contemptuously dismiss as "the system." Our point is that the enemies of that system, enemies who perhaps threaten it most, do not turn out to reside exclusively among the obstreperous or violent elements of our society. They reside in positions of great trust and responsibility within government itself. That is what is so disgraceful and so dispiriting about the latest news.